

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 TEL AV 06458 01 OF 04 301653Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 4 TEL AVIV 6458

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IS
SUBJ: THE LABOR PARTY: ITS PRESENT SITUATION AND UNHAPPY
FUTURE PROSPECTS

1. SUMMARY: BECAUSE OF ITS INCREASINGLY OBVIOUS INTERNAL
DIVISIONS AND ITS FAILURE TO RECOVER FROM THE PSYCHOLOGICAL
BLOW OF ITS DEFEAT IN MAY, THE LABOR PARTY DOES NOT NOW
PRESENT A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT.
THERE HAS BEEN GROWING SPECULATION ABOUT LABOR PARTY
SPLITS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A REALIGNMENT OF CENTRIST
AND MODERATE LABOR PARTY FORCES INTO EITHER A NEW OPPOSI-
TION BLOC WITH THE DMC OR A MAJOR NEW FORCE WHICH MIGHT
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PAGE 02 TEL AV 06458 01 OF 04 301653Z

JOIN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION. HOWEVER, DESPITE THE
DIVISIONS AND INTERNAL WEAKNESSES OF THE PARTY, AN IMME-
DIATE SPLIT OR THE POSSIBILITY OF LABOR OR EVEN ITS EX-
RAFI FACTION JOINTING A NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT RE-
MAINS REMOTE AT THIS STAGE.

2. THE LABOR PARTY IS UNABLE THUS FAR TO REFURBISH ITS

APPEAL TO THE CONSTITUENCIES WHOM IT MUST ATTRACT--PRIMARILY THE YOUTH AND THE SEPHARDIM--AND HAS BEEN AN INEFFECTIVE OPPOSITION. ALMOST ALL ITS PRESENT PROBLEMS AND ITS LACK OF A VIABLE FUTURE CAN BE TRACED TO A GLARING LACK OF LEADERSHIP. THE PRESENT GENERATION OF LEADERS ARE LARGELY DISCREDITED AND NO NEW ONES APPEAR ON THE HORIZON. A RECENT POLL SHOWS THAT THE PARTY HAS SLIPPED EVEN LOWER THAN THE ELECTION IN MAY REVEALED. WE BELIEVE IT WILL BE A LONG TIME BEFORE THE PARTY CAN AGAIN BECOME A POLITICAL FORCE CAPABLE OF MOUNTING AN EFFECTIVE CHALLENGE TO BEGIN'S CONTROL OF THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT. END SUMMARY

3. THE PRESENT SITUATION. THE LABOR PARTY, STILL SMARTING FROM THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SHOCK OF ITS ELECTORAL DEFEAT IN MAY, CONTINUES IN A STATE OF DISARRAY, UNABLE TO OFFER A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE LIKUD GOVERNMENT. PARTY MEETINGS ARE PLAGUED BY PERSONALITY CLASHES BETWEEN RABIN AND PERES. MOREOVER, EVEN THOUGH MUCH OF THE PRESS ECHOES SYMPATHETICALLY LABOR'S CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT, PERES' AND RABIN'S KNESSET SPEECHES HAVE AN EMPTY RING OF FUTILITY. THE MORE OUTSPOKEN MILITANTS OF THE ACHDUT AVODAH WING ARE PRESSING FOR PARTY UNITY ON THE BASIS OF A RETURN TO SOCIALIST PRINCIPLES AND A MORE AGGRESSIVE OPPOSITION TO THE LIKUD'S FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICIES, NOT ONLY ON THE MERIT OF SPECIFIC ISSUES BUT AS A MATTER

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 TEL AV 06458 01 OF 04 301653Z

OF IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL PRINCIPLES.

4. COMMITMENT TO A POLICY OF OPPOSITION FOR OPPOSITION'S SAKE REMAINS UNACCEPTABLE TO IMPORTANT SEGMENTS OF THE LABOR PARTY. DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE ALIGNMENT MADE A PARTIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL RECOVERY AS A RESULT OF ITS UNEXPECTED RETENTION OF AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IN THE HISTADRUT ELECTION -- A SUCCESS WHICH PROBABLY PREVENTED THE ABSOLUTE COLLAPSE OF THE PARTY -- ANY NOTION OF USING THE HISTADRUT AS AN INSTRUMENT TO CHALLENGE AND UNDERMINE THE GOVERNMENT SEEMS TO HAVE YEILDED TO THE AWARENESS OF HOW VULNERABLE THE HISTADRUT WOULD BE TO GOVERNMENT RETALIATION IN A PROLONGED CONFRONTATION.

5. POSSIBLE SPLITS AND REALIGNMENTS. STATEMENTS MADE BY LABOR AND SOME DMC MKS WHO WERE FORMERLY LABOR MEMBERS UNDERLINE THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE INTERNAL DIVISIONS WITHIN THE RANKS OF LABOR. THEY ALSO STRESS THE RECRIMINATIONS EXCHANGED BETWEEN RABIN AND PERES, AS WELL AS DIVISIONS WITHIN THE LEFT WING ACHDUT AVODAH, WHOSE KEY SPOKESMEN, YIGAL ALLON, ISRAEL GILILI, AND YITZHAK BEN AHARON, THE FORMER HISTADRUT SECRETARY GENERAL, HAVE BEEN RECENTLY

FEUDING OVER THE DEGREE OF MILITANCY WHICH THE LABOR PARTY SHOULD ASSUME IN OPPOSITION. GIVEN THESE INTERNAL RIVALRIES AND DISARRAY, THERE IS GROWING TALK ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF SPLITS AND REALIGNMENTS. THE LEFT WINGERS OF THE LABOR PARTY IN PARTICULAR NOW SUSPECT THAT PERES AND THE RAFI FACTION ARE WAITING FOR AN OPPORTUNITY TO BREAK WITH LABOR AND JOIN A COALITION WITH THE LIKUD GOVERNMENT, POSSIBLY TOGETHER WITH SOME DMC LEADERS DIS- ENCHANTED WITH YADIN'S DIRECTION OF DMC FORTUES. SUCH SPECULATION INVOLVES THE POSSIBLE FORMATION OF A COALITION OF THE DMC, ELEMENTS OF THE LIBERAL PARTY WING OF THE LIKUD, AND A SUBSTANTIAL GROUP OF ESSENTIALLY CENTRIST LABOR PARTY MEMBERS. HOWEVER, ALTHOUGH BACKSTAGE EFFORTS ARE GOING ON TO TRY TO WORK OUT SOMETHING ALONG THESE LINES, CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 04 TEL AV 06458 01 OF 04 301653Z

WE SEE LITTLE CHANCE THEY WILL PRODUCE ANY RESULTS. AT THIS STAGE THERE IS NO OUTSTANDING PERSONALITY ON THE HORIZON EITHER IN LABOR OR THE DMC WHO COULD RALLY THESE VARIOUS GROUPS TOGETHER, NOR IS THERE ANY ISSUE AROUND WHICH THEY COULD EASILY UNITE. MOREOVER, PERES IS NOT PSYCHOLOGICALLY PREPARED TO SPLIT HIS PARTY, DESPITE HIS DEPRESSION AND DEEP RESENTMENT ABOUT RABIN'S CONTINUOUS ATTACKS ON

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 06458 02 OF 04 301704Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 4 TEL AVIV 6458

HIM PERSONALLY.

6. ANOTHER REASON SUCH REALIGNMENTS ARE NOT LIKELY NOW IS THAT DESPITE POTENTIAL PERSONALITY AND POLICY RIFTS AND DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE LIKUD AND EVEN SOME EXPRESSIONS OF FRUSTRATION WITH THE WAY BEGIN RUNS HIS PARTY AND HIS GOVERNMENT, THERE IS LITTLE PROSPECT THAT EITHER LABOR OR THE DMC, OR THE TWO TOGETHER, COULD INDUCE ANY DEFECTION FROM EVEN A SEGMENT OF THE LIBERAL PARTY. THE LIBERALS HAVE FINALLY TASTED POWER, THANKS TO BEGIN; THEY HAVE NO CURRENT INCENTIVE TO ABANDON IT. AT THE SAME TIME, A FORMAL COALITION ARRANGEMENT BETWEEN LABOR AND DMC ALSO DOES NOT APPEAR VERY LIKELY IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE; RESENT-
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PAGE 02 TEL AV 06458 02 OF 04 301704Z

MENT ON THE PART OF MANY LABOR PARTY LEADERS AGAINST THE DMC FOR HAVING BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN THE ALIGNMENT'S ELECTORAL DEFEAT ON THE ONE HAND, AND FEARS OF DMC LEADERS OF BEING WALLOUED UP AS JUNIOR PARTNERS BY A LABOR DOMINATED OPPOSITION ON THE OTHER, MAKE ANY SUCH MOVES UN- LIKELY, AT LEAST UNTIL AFTER THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN 1978. THUS, SPECULATION ABOUT THE FORMATION OF A NEW POLI- TICAL FORCE IN ISRAEL REMAINS, IN OUR VIEW, HIGHLY UN- REALISTIC.

7. LABOR PARTY AND HISTRADRUT LEADERS HAVE TOLD US THEY HAVE LITTLE EXPECTATION OF A SPLIT WITHIN THE LABOR PARTY OR AN EARLY REALIGNMENT OF CENTER-LEFT FORCES. THEY SAY THAT IF EITHER WERE TO OCCUR, IT WOULD MEAN THE END OF THE LABOR PARTY. INSTEAD OF LEADING TO A RECOMBINED AND STRENGTHENED OPPOSITION WHICH COULD STAND AS A POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVE TO THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT, SUCH A SPLIT WOULD LIKELIER CONTRIBUTE TOWARD FURTHER FRAGMENTING THE OPPOSI- TION. NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE OBSERVERS WHO ARGUE THAT A LABOR PARTY SPLIT IS INEVITABLE. THE WELL- REGARDED COMMENTATOR JOSEF HARIF WROTE IN MA'ARIV AUG- UST 19 THAT A SPLIT IS UNAVOIDABLE AND THE ONLY UNDECIDED QUESTIONS ARE WHEN AND ON WHAT ISSUE. HE ALSO ARGUES THAT IT WOULD BE GOOD FOR THE LABOR PARTY BECAUSE IT CONTAINS TOO MANY DIVERSE ELEMENTS NOW AND A SPLIT COULD REMEDY THIS.

8. AS TO THE POSSIBILITY OF AN EVENTUAL NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT WHICH WOULD BE LED BY THE PRESENT COALITION AND IN WHICH SUBSTANTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE LABOR PARTY AND THE DMC WOULD PARTICIPATE, THIS ALSO DOES NOT SEEM LIKELY FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, SHORT OF AN IMMINENT WAR OR ANOTHER EXTREMELY CRITICAL SITUATION. THERE IS AN UNEASI-
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PAGE 03 TEL AV 06458 02 OF 04 301704Z

NESS ON THE PART OF SOME OF THE ISRAELI PUBLIC OVER THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISIONS TO ESTABLISH NEW SETTLEMENTS AND TO EXTEND EQUAL SOCIAL AND WELFARE STANDARDS TO THE OCCUPIED AREAS--AN UNEASINESS WHICH ARISES BECAUSE THE DECISIONS ARE REGARDED AS AN UNNECESSARY PROVOCATION OF THE U.S. AND LIKELY TO HARM U.S.-ISRAELI RELATIONS. THIS UNEASINESS MAKES THE JOINING OF SUCH A GOVERNMENT COALITION BY LABOR AND DMC FORCES AT THIS STAGE EVEN LESS ATTRACTIVE BECAUSE THEY DO NOT WISH TO SHARE THE BLAME FOR A WORSENING OF OUR RELATIONS. IF, HOWEVER, THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION WERE ONE OF THREAT RATHER THAN UNEASINESS, A NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT MIGHT BE MORE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED.

9. WHAT OF THE FUTURE? AS THE LABOR PARTY CONTEMPLATED THE DEFEAT IT HAD SUFFERED IN THE GENERAL ELECTION IN MAY, IT WAS CLEAR THAT IT FACED AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF REORGANIZATION AND REBUILDING. THE RESULTS OF THE HISTADRUT ELECTION IN JUNE GAVE THE PARTY REASON TO THINK THAT NOT EVERYTHING HAD BEEN LOST AND THAT THE PARTY STILL HAD A RELIABLE BASE ON WHICH TO BUILD. THAT REASSURANCE HAS PROVEN TO BE SOMEWHAT EPHEMERAL AND THE PARTY'S SELF-CONFIDENCE HAS RATHER QUICKLY DISSIPATED FOLLOWING THAT MOMENTARY BOOST.

10. AS THE PARTY FACED ITS REBUILDING TASK, IT WAS EVIDENT IT MUST BUILD UP ITS APPEAL TO SEVERAL IMPORTANT VOTER CONSTITUENCIES. ONE OF THESE IS YOUTH. A FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIAL HAS RELATED TO US THE STORY OF HIS SON'S ARMY UNIT IN WHICH ONLY THREE OF 50 YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN VOTED FOR THE LABOR PARTY IN MAY. WE HAVE SEEN NO VIABLE EFFORT YET BY THE PARTY TO RENEW ITS APPEAL TO YOUNG PEOPLE.

11. A SECOND MAJOR CONSTITUENCY IS THAT OF THE SEPHARDIC VOTERS, WHO ARE PRIMARILY TO BE FOUND IN ISRAEL'S WORKING CLASS. HERE AGAIN, THE PARTY HAS HAD NO VISIBLE SUCCESS IN APPEALING TO THESE VOTERS. IT APPEARS UNABLE TO BUILD
CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 04 TEL AV 06458 02 OF 04 301704Z

UPON ITS HISTADRUT BASE IN BROADENING ITS APPEAL, PROBABLY
BECAUSE OF THE DIVISION AMONG ITS LEADERSHIP. HISTADRUT
SECRETARY GENERAL MESHEL IS NOT POPULAR AMONG OTHER PARTY
LEADERS AND HE HAS BEEN UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO LEAD

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 06458 03 OF 04 301633Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 3 OF 4 TEL AVIV 6458

WHAT MIGHT BE EXPECTED TO BE A CONCENTRATED APPEAL TO
SEPHARDIC LABORERS.

12. A THIRD CONSTITUENCY IS THE FORMER LABOR SUPPORTERS
WHO DEFECTED TO THE DMC. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THESE VOTERS
ARE YET RETURNING TO LABOR PARTY RANKS.

13. THE LABOR PARTY HAS PROVEN INEFFECTIVE IN ITS OPPOSI-
TION ROLE IN THE KNESSET. IT HAS SNIPED AT THE LIKUD BUT
HAS BEEN INEFFECTUAL EVEN ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES
WHERE ITS OPPOSITION MIGHT HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVE. (THIS
MAY REFLECT A FEELING AMONG PARTY LEADERSHIP THAT THEY DO
NOT DISAGREE BASICALLY WITH LIKUD FOREIGN POLICY DECISIONS,

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PAGE 02 TEL AV 06458 03 OF 04 301633Z

FOR EXAMPLE, HARIF ARGUES THAT A NUMBER OF LABOR MKS WOULD NOT VOTE AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT ON WEST BANK SETTLEMENT ISSUES, EVEN IN A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE.) THE LABOR PARTY MAY DO BETTER IN ITS OPPOSITION AS THE KNESSET MOVES TO CONSIDER DOMESTIC ISSUES, SUCH AS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICIES WHERE A MORE CLASSIC SOCIALIST/CONSERVATIVE DISAGREEMENT CAN BE EXPECTED.

14. A RECENT PUBLIC OPINION POLL PUBLISHED AUGUST 21 CONFIRMS THE CONTINUATION OF THE DOWNWARD TREND DISPLAYED BY THE LABOR PARTY. THE POLL SHOWS THAT IF AN ELECTION WERE TO BE HELD AT THE PRESENT TIME THE LABOR PARTY KNESSET DELEGATION WOULD BE REDUCED FROM 32 TO 24 (SEPTEL).

15. LABOR'S POOR PERFORMANCE IN THE OPPOSITION IS PROBABLY DUE TO ITS INABILITY TO SAY "WE CAN DO BETTER." THE PARTY IS STILL LED BY THE SAME LEADERS WHO DEMONSTRABLY CANNOT DO BETTER AND THE ELECTORATE CLEARLY EXPRESSED ITS OPINION ON THAT SUBJECT IN MAY. THIS QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP IS, IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, THE MAJOR CAUSE FOR THE POOR SHOWING OF THE PARTY AND ITS APPARENT INABILITY TO PULL ITSELF TOGETHER.

16. LEADERSHIP. THE PARTY CLEARLY SUFFERS FROM THE ABSENCE OF A FIRM, CHARISMATIC LEADER WHO IS ABLE TO PULL THE FACTIONS OF THE PARTY TOGETHER AND BEGIN WITH THE RECONSTRUCTION EFFORT. THE ABSENCE OF A STRONG LEADER IN THE LABOR PARTY IS, OF COURSE, MORE NOTICEABLE BECAUSE OF COMPARISON WITH THE STRONG LEADERSHIP OF BEGIN IN THE LIKUD. THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN PERES, THE NOMINAL HEAD OF THE PARTY AND THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, AND RABIN IS AS GREAT AS EVER. RABIN, FOR EXAMPLE, SAYS THAT HE DOES NOT REGARD PERES AS HEAD OF THE PARTY AND CONTINUES HIS INTERNECINE QUARRELING
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PAGE 03 TEL AV 06458 03 OF 04 301633Z

WITH HIS FORMER MINISTER OF DEFENSE. HE IS SAID TO HAVE TWO AMBITIONS: IN LIFE AT THIS JUNCTURE: TO DESTROY PERES AND TO REHABILITATE HIS OWN REPUTATION. ALL INDICATORS ARE THAT HE GIVES PRIORITY TO THE FIRST. PERES IS STILL CLOSE TO DAYAN AND HAS MET WITH HIM A NUMBER OF TIMES IN RECENT WEEKS. PERES' VIEWS ABOUT THE WEST BANK ARE PROBABLY CLOSER TO THOSE OF DAYAN THAN TO THOSE OF MANY OF HIS LABOR PARTY COLLEAGUES.

17. IF PERES MAY NOT BE ABLE TO LEAD THE PARTY IN ITS RECONSTRUCTION, THEN WHO? NOT RABIN -- WHO IS STILL REGARDED AS THE LEADER OF THE MAPAI FACTION -- BECAUSE HIS MISFORTUNES ARE GENERALLY CREDITED AS HAVING PRODUCED THE PARTY'S DEFEAT. NO RESPONSIBLE OBSERVER BELIEVES HE COULD EVER AGAIN SERVE AS PRIME MINISTER. NOT ALLON -- THE LEADER OF THE ACHDUT AVODAH -- ALTHOUGH HE AT LEAST HAS THE SUPPORT OF THE KIBBUTZIM AND MOSHAVIM MOVEMENTS. NOT MESHEL, BECAUSE MOST PARTY LEADERS AGREE THAT THE LABOR PARTY WON IN THE HISTADRUT ELECTION IN SPITE OF MESHEL, NOT BECAUSE OF HIM. ALTHOUGH THERE CLEARLY IS SOME TALENT STILL AVAILABLE IN PEOPLE LIKE ZADOK AND BAR-LEV, THEY ARE NOT GENERALLY REGARDED AS FIRST-RATE LEADERSHIP MATERIAL.

18. CAN A NEW GENERATION OF THE LABOR PARTY PRODUCE EFFECTIVE NEW LEADERSHIP? NAMES SUCH AS BARAM, SARID AND ROSOLIO COME TO MIND BUT NONE OF THESE APPEARS YET TO BE WELL ESTABLISHED OR WELL ENOUGH KNOWN TO BECOME THE ACCEPTED LEADER OF THE PARTY WITH ALL ITS DISPARATE FAC- TIONS. (IT CAN PERHAPS BE ARGUED THAT THIS DEARTH OF LEADER- SHIP IS THE REAL COST TO THE LABOR PARTY OF THE UPSURGE OF THE DMC. THE DEFECTION TO THIS NEW MOVEMENT OF A NUMBER OF ABLE, ACTIVE INNOVATIVE LEADERS FROM THE LABOR PARTY -- AMIT AND GOLOMB AND, TO A LESSER EXTENT, ZOREA AND TOLEDANO -- HAS LEFT A REAL GAP.)

19. IN CONCLUSION, WE SEE A PARTY HOBBOLED BY DESTRUCTIVE, CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 04 TEL AV 06458 03 OF 04 301633Z

BITTER MEN AMONG THE TOP LEADERS, A LACK OF NEW LEADERSHIP, AND FACING A NEED FOR A LONG AND SLOW OVERHAUL. IN THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES THE PARTY PRESENTS NO THREAT TO THE LIKUD AND IN OUR JUDGEMENT HAS VIRTUALLY NO CHANCE OF REGAINING POWER ANY TIME SOON. AS ZADOK REMARKED RE-

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 06458 04 OF 04 301624Z
ACTION NEA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 4 OF 4 TEL AVIV 6458

CENTLY, IF THE PARTY WERE NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO RETAIN POWER,
IT CANNOT HOPE TO REGAIN IT, WHICH IS A MORE DIFFICULT
TASK. LEADERSHIP WILL BE A CONTINUING PROBLEM FOR THE
PARTY -- IT HAS A LOT OF GOOD MATERIAL BUT ITS INTERESTS
ARE TOO DIVERSE; THERE IS NO LONGER MUCH IDEOLOGICAL
CEMENT. IF THERE WERE, LEADERSHIP WOULD NOT BE SUCH A
PROBLEM.

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